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Cutting the Cloth

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08: Cutting the cloth

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My position is such that my work sits between research – into such things as fabric cast concrete - and practice, which is predominantly in social housing. Alongside this I teach and do more than my fair share of administration. What I would like to talk about today is understanding the opposing values in relation to the design of domestic space. In particular, design quality in private housing. Not so much the quantification of space but what we mean by quality and in particular, looking at the relationship between internal layout, external design and the marketing of domestic space in the private sector.

The evidence base that I am going to draw on is a report which is the output of a research project *Design at the heart of house building* which was commissioned by the Scottish Executive (now the Scottish Government). The work was carried out in 2007 and the report was published in 2008. To win the bid we formed a consortium between three institutions – Heriot Watt University, which led the research, Edinburgh College of Art and myself from the University of Edinburgh¹. For an architect who has worked predominantly in the public sector it provided a fascinating insight into a very different world in the private sector.

The main objective of the research was to understand how the private housing sector conceives of design quality and how it is integrated into the development process. It was also to try and pin-point perceived barriers to achieving design quality and to identify some case studies which demonstrated how those barriers had been overcome. We were also asked to look at the role of bespoke design or one-off design within house-building.

The methodology was very tightly set and was defined by the brief. This was through three phases: an email survey first of all, followed by semi-structured face to face interviews with a sample of the house builders senior management and finally identifying case studies which were demonstration projects of overcoming the barriers that were identified.

The research, which is a very weighty document, revealed the very complex nature of the industry and the very different ethos that exists among the house builders themselves – depending on their business models for instance, and also among ourselves as architects. Today I am not really going to look into that research in detail. There are a lot of statistics in there and the report can be downloaded from the Scottish Government website. What I would like to do is move on to one particular aspect which I found of personal interest that stems from this research.

Probably the most difficult question for developers was how to define design quality; it is actually quite a slippery question. The majority of firms considered that design quality was something between the quality of the interior design and the estate layout. Exterior building design and in particular the urban design were really much further down their list of priorities.

For the majority of developers, design is seen as adding to sale value, particularly in the executive market, and can help to achieve planning permission. The research confirmed that there are very different values across the industry and, sadly, architects

are considered by the developers to have different priorities from customers. In particular we are thought to have less emphasis on buildability, on core cost and less commercial understanding. As such, we are in danger of remaining aloof from private house building or indeed subordinated within the design process.

Most firms base their activity on some form of standard layout, a standard house type. The argument is that standardisation and repetition improves design quality through trial and testing. It also clearly improves buildability because they can design out faults and, hence, increase profitability - both of which are highly valued factors. It is interesting to note that greenfield sites are much more likely to roll out a standard product than urban or brownfield sites. The way in which land is purchased also affects the use of standard house types. For instance, land which is won in competition really has to be built much more quickly and so they tend to use a standard product in that case. Land which has been banked or been in ownership for some time however, allows for more innovation because they can take more time to develop it.

Designs which are predominantly individual may make much more use of external consultants, and those are generally thought of as 'bespoke'. These tend to only be used for a specific site, brownfield or dense urban sites, or ones which are considered to be difficult to obtain planning permission. For the most part developers did not think that those bespoke designs were better quality although they would concede that they tended to provide a better sense of place in general urban design.

A number of the housing developers use the metaphor of "jacketing" or "clothing" or "dressing" an otherwise standard product to represent the house as contemporary or traditional. The concept of jacketing is reminiscent of Gottfried Semper's idea of dressing - the separation of the structural "kern" from the art or "kunst" form; the wall being the symbolic surface which communicates with the viewer. For the developer the jacket could be adjusting the windows in a gable or changing materials to suit the demands of a particular local planning authority. The jackets have the effect of extending the range of products without major additional investment in developing new plan forms.

Illustration 1 shows an example from a very highly respected Scottish house builder, Mactaggart & Mickel, at The Drum in Bo'ness. The top picture is a typical two-bed flat, their Raasay range, which is very popular. At the foot is how it is re-dressed by the architect Roan Rutherford, who is actually also named as part of the marketing. The dressing here is more than superficial, it is a response to the site and to the brief. It also reinforces the urban design and makes a stronger connection between the inside and outside - in other words, a proper tailoring of the jacket to fit the site and the aspirations.

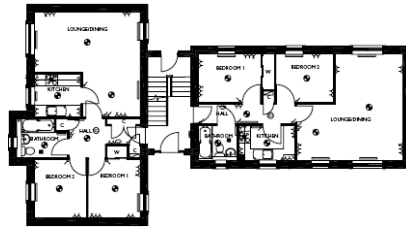


Illustration 1: Mactaggart & Mickel Raasay apartment - standard and as 'dressed' by Roan Rutherford – Wren Rutherford, Austin Smith Lord at the Drum Bo'ness

The less that is changed the more profitable the house type is likely to be because the design will fit within existing specifications, components and so on. Thus the quality is maintained using this tried and tested plan form, but some variety is introduced. The developer keeps tight control on the architects used in this process, often suppressing what is perceived as over-design. The general attitude that we found was that architects can be useful so long as they are kept on a tight leash.

Illustration 2 is a further example from Mactaggart & Mickel and if you look closely you will realise that it is exactly the same house plan. The developer may use jackets to respond to concerns of the local planning authority in order to customise the product for a particular context. These, as I have noted, can either be in terms of materiality or, in this case, the same layout is addressed in response to a suburban or rural symbolism. Perhaps the symbolism is unconscious and maybe it is more likely to be about taking the line of least resistance through planning.



- In suburban attire



- In rural attire



Illustration 2: Mactaggart & Mickel 'Staffa' House

This ambiguity in design and separation of outside from inside can be problematic for architects trained in a modernist tradition where the plan is always the generator. The sense that one has to be honest in expression of the inside on the outside is at the root of the architect's training, and yet the developer has no such bias. Robert Venturi noted that the contradictory demands of inside and outside, private and public, should be accommodated within the façade, not necessarily resolved, but expressive of any contradiction or discord. To quote from Venturi: "Since the inside is different from the outside, the wall or point of change becomes the architectural event"ⁱⁱ, so he sees the possibility of providing contrast and ambiguity between inside and outside as an essential characteristic of urban architecture.

Illustration 3 shows that the firm has developed an open plan interior in response to perceived changes of lifestyle, but had no issue with putting different windows to the front and back of the same large room. You will note the astragals at the front and the large plain windows at the back. Their argument was that the home owner would wish to have a traditional front and a contemporary back, facing the garden. Ambiguity is also evidenced in the historical eclecticism and style. I should point out this is the central belt of Scotland, not west coast America – yet modern spaces in function such as the kitchen and so on are simply dressed in that style. Even the light fittings are traditional at the front of the same room and modern at the back.

There is also a desire for affluence and status and yet low economic cost. House builders seem to understand and go out of their way to construct the associated imagery and symbolism of security and fulfilment of their suburban dream, and architects often find that an anathema.



Illustration 3: Ambiguity (Manorlane 'Bond' House)

In my own practice's work, which is concerned predominantly with social housing, we are generally driven by context, historical analysis, design of interior and exterior space, urban design, materials and expression. There is still a sense of clothing, of course, but it tends to draw or make reference to a much wider set of factors. Here the architecture is the product. Architects are less likely to repeat house types but we will repeat elements, conscious of seeing our projects as relating to each other in terms of a design expression and identity. It does not mean that we relegate buildability and

liveability – in fact we would argue that we put enormous effort into this, but what does concern us is that the authority is clear. We are selling originality and creativity as part of our services but when employed by the private sector the copyright is frequently forfeited to the developer to allow for future modification and use as a standard house type. As the study highlighted, there isn't a complete stand-off between developers and architects but we are still mutually very wary of each other and critical of each other's stance.

The jacketing can take a variety of forms analogous to clothes design and the fashion industry. The idea that the house buyer shops for a product is a strange concept for most architects, but it is largely the basis by which our houses are marketed and sold. Some developers use the analogy of buying a car, but it is important to realise that the industry is not in the business to produce architecture. The commercial reality is that the industry exists to produce houses which will sell and generate profit. Marketing reflects this product-based approach and the separation of lifestyle from built fabric is apparent in websites, some of which are devoid of any image of the house. The most extreme one I found was where there were three images; some cutlery, a sofa and a couple frolicking in the woods but no picture of a house at all.

The names of the products also try and tap into this aspiration of the buyer. As noted before, the design quality as defined by the private sector encompasses a complex set of issues and is dependent on the business model. The house buyer, with a wide variety of products on offer, will choose whichever suits their budget and their outlook best, provided the location is suitable. We found in general that the private sector is not concerned with flexibility or houses for life. Unlike social housing, developers want people to buy another house, preferably one of their own products, when their circumstances change. We are also now seeing the rise of the designer label in housing as the exchange value becomes as equally marketed as the use value. Indeed, some people have already made reference to the shift from 'home' becoming 'property'.

We are now also seeing a very sophisticated selling of domestic space, with visions of lifestyle carefully targeted at a particular audience. Individualism is mainly expressed in decoration, furniture and gardens. These are closely linked to status, hence the references to activities and possessions as being of equal importance to the representation and sense of space. Space, where represented, is not defined by size but by use and maybe that is a good thing. But, as a voice-over for a recently completed scheme notes "Of the master bedroom, there is bags of room, room enough to twirl or for your morning pilates. The penthouse-style living area takes widescreen advantage of the views. Walls are high and wide with space for paintings, tapestries or plasma TVs". A large cupboard at the back is described as offering storage "for anything from champagne to snowboards". The imagery is very carefully constructed and consistent with a lifestyle. The images show signs of inhabitation, such as an unmade bed in the bachelor pad, rather than normal, pristine spaces.

In the most extreme example I have found houses are marketed by horoscope, no doubt a response to market research on a particular customer base. I learnt that apparently those born under the sign of Aries need more cupboards as they cannot throw anything out.

In summary, the marketing of mass housing in the UK has little to do with space, light or context. It is dominated by constructed lifestyles; the assessment of who you are or who you aspire to be. A product or house type is selected according to the lifestyle

and image that the buyer wishes to project about themselves. This is where the external jacket comes into play because the same product may be modified to appeal to different buyers and different locations. Next – and this was difficult for me to appreciate – house buyers can then find out where that particular product may be available in the region in which they wish to live. Car dependency is part of this equation and it seems that the product and the lifestyle come above the particular location as one suburban estate is seen as much like another. Finally comes the viewing of the property. Only then does the quality and specification of the internal and external space come into play. Sadly, for the most part, the urban design, connectivity, community, quality of light and architecture is relegated.

The research has confirmed that house-building involves a very complex set of issues that together restrict design quality. I would note that many developers are now trying very hard to raise the importance of urban design. They appreciate clear guidance on planning policy in this respect. Unpredictability, inconsistency, the slow speed of planning authorities, unclear advice or lack of ambition in planners, land supply and contradictory legislation were all raised as some of the barriers they face. Now reflecting personally on the experience I would add marketing to this list, which puts the specifications of kitchens and taps above that of the level of insulation or lifetime costs, or any sense of flexibility. Architects do need to understand the commercial reality of the industry to find ways in which these opposing values can be reassessed and common ground found in our aspirations for the design of homes.

ⁱ Professor Paul Jenkins, James Morgan, Harry Smith (Heriot Watt University) and Sole Garcia Ferrari (eca)

ⁱⁱ R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, 1977), p.48, p.84